



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

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AMERICA'S SUCCESSFUL WILD ANIMALS--SOMETHING TO GIVE THANKS FOR

Two of America's most successful wild animals were included on the menu of an early Thanksgiving dinner. Turkey and venison were boiled together to make a "spetiall instrument," according to the records of the Virginia Colony for December 1622.

The Indian guests, however, were described as being fearful the strange mixture might offend the spirits of the animals, causing them to vanish from the forest.

As it turned out, the Indian's prophecy was right. During the hurried and often reckless settlement of the land, a wide variety of native wild animals were displaced by farms, cities, railroads, and industrial development, or were killed to supply meat, fur, or skins for settlers and commercial trade.

But today, through the support of the American people and the efforts of State and Federal wildlife management agencies, most of the Nation's wild animals are thriving--some to a remarkable degree considering the obstacles that had to be overcome.

As more and more land was settled, buffalo, deer, elk, and antelope, once numbering in untold millions, were displaced from large portions of their former ranges and survived only in small groups in the more remote areas. Buffalo, in fact, declined from an estimated population of 60 million in pre-colonial times to less than 1,000 by 1900.

Wild turkey disappeared from many areas too, leaving as their only trace countless "Turkey Runs," "Turkey Creeks," "Turkey Points," and "Turkey Keys" everywhere in their original range from Florida to Nebraska.

Swans were commercially hunted for their skins, feathers, and meat. Their decline is documented in the records of the Hudson's Bay Company, which alone sold nearly 18,000 swan skins to the fashionable millinery trade of Europe between 1853 and 1877.

By the early 1930's, ducks and geese were severely threatened by drought, by draining of their wetland habitat for agricultural purposes, and by serious outbreaks of botulism.

Lake trout suffered the most insidious destruction of all. For thousands of years, the "Namaycush" or "mackinaw," as they were called by Great Lakes Indians, teemed in the deep rivers and lakes of the north. Protected by Niagara Falls from an invasion of their worst enemy, the parasitic sea lamprey, the lake trout were a mainstay of the valuable Great Lakes commercial fishery, which began at the turn of the century.

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But by the 1920's, lake trout catches had declined noticeably. The lethal blow had really been dealt 100 years earlier when the Welland Canal was excavated in 1829 on the Canadian side of the Niagara, affording boat passage around the falls. By 1921 the lampreys had found their way through the canal into Lake Erie and by the 1940's they were wreaking havoc on the once mighty fishery throughout the Great Lakes.

Before 1930, conservation efforts were largely uncoordinated and primarily consisted of law enforcement, game farms, a few wildlife refuges and fish hatcheries, predator control, and winter feeding programs.

The Depression proved a blessing in disguise to fish and wildlife. To provide jobs, huge public works projects such as the Civilian Conservation Corps were created. Better fish hatcheries were built, more refuges were established, marshes were created or preserved, shelterbelts were planted, and dozens of other similar improvements were completed throughout the entire country that would benefit wildlife and protect the land's fertility for decades to come.

Of more importance during those years, however, was the emergence of the science of wildlife management. Recognition that existing knowledge and management methods were inadequate led to the establishment of graduate education programs in fish and wildlife biology and management. These programs provided, for the first time, a group of scientifically trained professionals to fill positions in State and Federal fish and wildlife agencies. Soon winter feeding programs, game farms, bounty systems, and other such programs were being replaced by greater emphasis on preservation of natural habitat, more basic research, and careful management of fish and wildlife based on the new research data.

Wildlife management based on research was, in fact, the "special instrument" behind the recovery of all of America's successful wild animals.

Extensive studies by both U.S. and Canadian biologists led to the development of a chemical that could be used to control sea lampreys without harm to other fish. Using this and other methods, the lamprey infestation has been reduced by 90 percent and the way is now open for the lake trout to return.

As a result of restocking programs, beaver are back in most of their original range. In some places they are numerous and even considered a serious nuisance for plugging up irrigation ditches and road culverts. It is said one even tried to raise the water level of Grand Coulee Dam by working on the spillway.

Buffalo, elk, deer, and antelope have also made a dramatic comeback. Protection of the remaining herds, the establishment of refuges, and the improvement of wildlife habitat enabled these animals to increase their numbers. Today there are 60,000 buffalo, at least a million elk, 500,000 antelope, and--at 12.5 million--there are more deer than was ever known in recorded history. All of which adds up to a remarkable recovery, considering that the land all these animals occupied in 1622 must now also support over 225 million people.

Trumpeter swans were thought to be extinct in the United States until 1935, when a study showed that 73 remained in the vicinity of Yellowstone National Park. Because of successful efforts to reestablish and manage trumpeters on several national wildlife refuges in the West, the majestic birds now number nearly a thousand.

Several other species of swans, ducks, and geese are also faring much better today than 50 years ago. Banding studies have provided biologists with good information on the birds' migration routes and populations. Many national wildlife refuges have been established along the migration routes, and are managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service so that they will continue to provide nesting, resting, and wintering areas for waterfowl. Waterfowl numbers are surveyed each year and the resulting population information used to establish hunting regulations, ensuring that appropriate numbers of each species will survive to breed the next year. Research has also led to a better understanding of various species' habitat needs and of the effects of predators, disease, and pollutants on waterfowl populations. In an average year, from 7 to 8 million geese and 95 million ducks come down the flyways to their wintering grounds.

One of the best known of the wildlife management success stories, however, is that of the wild turkey. Not only has it been restored to the "Turkey Creeks" of its original home, but its range has been nearly doubled and now extends to the Canadian border and throughout most of the Nation, including the Pacific Northwest.

Even the most pessimistic Indian guest of that long ago Thanksgiving would have been pleased at how well the "spetiall instrument" worked in conserving American's native fish and wildlife.

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